CONTEXTUALIZING THE FEMININE: A STUDY OF SELECT WRITINGS OF KAVITA KANÉ

SYNOPSIS

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Reema Devi (20PHEG02W)

Department of English

School of Humanities & Social Sciences

Lingaya's Vidyapeeth, Faridabad, Haryana

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Introduction

Psyche: Throughout its long history, the meaning of the term "psyche" has been modified in different sociocultural settings. Psyche, a historically constituted concept, initially represented 'breathing', 'vital force' etc. However, later it was used to represent spiritual, immaterial substance. The Greek term "psyche", which means breathe or blow, has been translated as "anima" in Latin, as "soul" in English, and as "Seele" in German.

In the Homeric Poems of the second half of the eighth century BC, psyche was identified as the vital force linked to the individual body. It was considered impossible as a purely spiritual and immaterial substance.

In the second century AD, Lucius Apuleius depicted a mythical image of Psyche in the myth "Eros and Psyche" (or "Cupid and Psyche") as a beautiful princess who fell in love with Cupid. In nineteenth century, German philosopher W. M. Wundt suggested the foundation of a "new psychology" as a discipline of consciousness pertaining to the self-contained inner states of individuals (Graumann, 1996).

In his poem "Ode to Psyche", John Keats does not describe the plot of the original Cupid and Psyche myth rather makes it a mental state. Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung used the German word "Seele" as a synonym of "psyche" to include both – the conscious, as proposed by Wundt, and the unconscious possession. Jung described psyche as the totality of psychological processes, conscious as well as unconscious (The C.G. Jung page, The C.G. Jung page, 2012). However, with the rise of "new psychology" at the end of the nineteenth century, the perspective of the establishment of a science of psyche was defeated. Terms such as mind, behaviour etc. slowly replaced "soul". The word "mind" focused mainly on cognitive processes and intellect, thereby losing the spiritual, transcendental connotation of the term "psyche". It is a representation of our innermost unconscious self. It's a separate entity which makes us who we are. It influences thought patterns, opinions, values, emotions, feelings and personality.

Female Psyche: Of late, there has emerged a group of writers who concentrate on retelling mythologies in their own terms. They focus on giving a new rendering to female psyche from their own rationale, which has provided researchers with ample opportunities to investigate the female psyche and their inner world.

The term 'female psyche' refers to the inner working of the mind of female characters. It is evident from various studies in Indian context, that women undergo certain trials and tribulations while interacting in a male-dominant society. In such a society, women are unable to express their complex thoughts freely, struggling against its set norms. Realization of such types of experiences make them either accept defeat or show signs of rebellion. The purpose of studying the female-psyche is to reveal their inner thoughts and conflicts with self and their environment.

Thus, the study of female psyche refers to the understanding of female thoughts, their interaction with inner and external world, their decision making, problem-solving attitude and their outlook of perceiving things in their own way. In short, female characters' thoughts and words are a perfect replica of their inner conflict and confusion. The study of female psyche involves decoding women's experiences and interpreting them while highlighting their subjective discourse with their confined atmosphere.

The influence of different types of relationships reflects its deep impact on the female mind which provoke them to react differently. In order to comprehend the female psyche, one must possess an empathetic attitude towards them.

Research Problem and Hypothesis

The purpose of this proposed research is to analyze and study the female characters in context of female psyche from Kavita Kane's mythological novels - *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen (2013)*, *Sita's Sister (2014)*, *Menaka's Choice (2015)*, *Lanka's Princess (2016)*, *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty (2017)* and *Ahalya's Awakening (2019).* In doing so, some of the queries that will be addressed are: Can the 'female self', 'female identity' and 'their choices' be understood through the study of female psyche? Can studying female psyche help in interpreting female subjectivity and their action as well as reaction to the external forces? Are these external forces such as patriarchy, social obligation etc. responsible for creating the 'female self? Sincere effort will be put in to bring forth the gynocentric issues of the characters under study.

Kane has tried to reconstruct and retell old stories and content in a new fashion. Her female characters have been evaluated, scanned and scrutinized by scholars and researchers using different lenses. It is hypothesized that they have been studied either as marginalized or voiceless characters.

The present research proposal is based on the hypothesis that her novels need a detailed study in order to understand the female psyche from a different perspective by analyzing all the prominent female characters from her novels. It would add a new dimension to the understanding of the female psyche, their problems and dilemmas.

Objectives and Aims

The main objective of the proposed research is to study and analyze in detail, the female psyche from mythological tales by Kavita Kane. The proposed research will be conducted for understanding complexities, passions and dilemmas of women in a very subtle style. The study will also observe how they react differently under different circumstances in a patriarchal setup. This would show what sets them apart from other characters. Another objective would be to study how the novelist has created awareness about the sufferings, failure, pain and problems of the female protagonists by creating a new atmosphere in their surroundings.

The main aim of the research is to focus on the nature and activities of the female characters of the novels under study and to examine their psyche. Another objective will be to study the liberated attitude of women to create new individuals.

Literature Review:

Devdutt Pattanaik in his book *Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology,* he describes myth as a "cultural common understanding" of the world. This understanding that binds and connects individuals and communities together may be religious or secular.

In his book, *Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, Williams says: "All mythologies probe the great themes of life: good and evil, the purpose of living, death and what lies beyond, struggle and suffering, challenge and determination, hope and perseverance. Some themes address a time before human life began—cosmic time at the beginning, or what was before the beginning of time. Other

themes probe an ambiguity in existence that stretches concepts of good and evil, making them relative to an absolute perspective – ethics viewed from a divine or cosmic viewpoint." (15)

As referred to in "Indian English Fictions: Myths Interspersed" by a scholar (Raj 2395 - 2628), we find traces of extensive use of Indian myth in almost every genre of literature. Many renowned writers consider Indian mythology as their muse and inspiration. R.K. Narayan, A.K. Ramanujan, Raja Rao, and modern writers like Devadutt Pattnaik, Amit Tripathy, Shashi Tharoor, Kavita Kané, Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni, etc. have used Indian mythology in their fictional works in various contexts. They have used this inspiration to retell and revise the myths to portray and handle different issues in their literature. Indian myths have proven to be open texts and the subject of multiple interpretations. The scholar (Raj) also points out that, "Sometimes myth is used to evoke nationalism and sometimes it is used as a satire against social norms. Ancient manuscript like Bhagavad Gita was used for nationalistic purposes by Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi during the Indian freedom movement. Allegorical representation of mythical legends and tales are very common in their works."

Among the writers mentioned above is Kavita Kané, a well-known literary figure whose contributions in the form of the novels such as - *The Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen (2013)*, *Sita's Sister (2014)*, *Menaka's Choice (2015)*, *Lanka's Princess (2016)*, *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty (2017)* and *Ahalya's Awakening (2019)* – retell the stories of two of the greatest Indian epics - *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Except for a few well-known figures, women characters have often remained sidelined and given less attention than male characters in epics, despite having played an important role. Rai, in her research, states that Kané has taken upon herself to renovate the traditional writing by reconstructing the mythological characters. Kané has further tried to justify her writings by performing a systematic study of these characters, which can also be viewed as rather unconventional. She has illustrated these unheard of or less mentioned female characters in different contexts in order to serve a literary purpose and draw people's attention to their stories and struggles. Through her novels, she has awakened the readers and has bound scholars and literary figures to analyze and evaluate them. She has retold the epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, from the perspective of unsung female characters like Urmila, Surpanakha, Ahalya, Draupadi, Uruvi and Kunti.

In an interview, Kavita Kané justifies her portrayal of female characters thorough her reconstruction of their characters. She makes it clear that her feelings are unbiased, as she says:

"Mythology, I believe, should make you think, not judge. And that's how I portray my women - without any bias, be it a dark character like Surpanakha in *Lanka's Princess* or the treacherous Menaka of *Menaka's Choice*. Or be it a strong positive character like Urmila. I am simply telling the unheard story of a Surpanakha or Menaka and a Satyavati. I am not interested in painting the white black or the black white." (Interview by Chakravarthy, 2018)

In a journal under the heading "Retrieval of Female Subjectivity in Indian English Writing: Kavita Kané's Feministic Concern", the scholar (Asha) points out the stance of Helene Cixous, a French feminist:

"Woman must write herself; must write about women and bring a woman to writing, from which they have been driven away so violently as from their bodies for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. A woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history – by her own movement… write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth." (Helene Cixous, 875)

Kané's novels revolve around female characters from Indian mythology and are focused on portraying female characters in a new light. They are inspired by either *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*, which are the backbone of Hindu culture and civilization. Her female characters are from the mythological realm and what they have in common is that they have remained marginalized through the ages and Kavita Kané retells their story from a fresh perspective.

Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen

Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen is Kavita Kané's first novel. The novel has been set against the backdrop of *Mahabharata*, one of the greatest Indian epics. Throughout the epic, the marital aspect of Karna's life is rarely mentioned. But Kané centralizes her novel around it. In Karna's Wife, Vrushali is still depicted as Karna's first wife, but Uruvi, a fictional character, replaces Supriya, his wife as mentioned in many modern adaptations of the epic. Uruvi is a

Kshatriya and princess of Pukeya, a fictional kingdom in the novel. She is the second wife of Karna, who is an outcast. Uruvi, the protagonist of the story, has been portrayed as a bold and decisive character. The creation of her character has been based on Tamil folklore. She is the daughter of Vashuha and Shubra. She falls in love with Karna, but her parents want her to marry Arjuna. However, as per the scriptures, being a Kshatriya, she is not permitted to marry a person belonging to a lower status. But she rebels and denies following the unjust social norms framed for women and goes on to marry the man of her choice. She dares to challenge the norms of the patriarchal society, and when she finally marries him, she suffers utmost humiliation and ridicule. Her sense of impartiality, her assertiveness of identity and resilience is praised and highlighted throughout the novel.

Apart from Uruvi, the novel also investigates the psyche of other female characters such as Kunti, Draupadi, Bhanumati and Varushali. Kunti was the mother of the Pandavas and Karna. She was the aunt of Krishna and has her own tale of suffering and agony. She was born as Pritha to the Yadava chief Shurasen but was later adopted by her childless uncle, King Kuntibhoja and he later renamed her as 'Kunti'. According to Vijayan's research, Kunti was victimised at the hands of patriarchy, and Kané does a splendid job at bringing out her tragic picture. Kunti lost everything, including her identity, name, father, husband, kingdom and pleasure. The portrayal of this character shows us how much a woman suffers because of patriarchal domination. In Vijayan's opinion, Kané describes the greatness as well as the sufferings of Kunti in a brilliant way. The reader, through her portrayal in the novel, finds Kunti to be a very strong and determined character. Draupadi, another character from *Mahabharata*, is described as one of the most beautiful women of her time. It was prophesied that she would bring a significant and major change in the future, which turns out to be accurate as she goes on to become one of the main reasons behind the Kurukshetra War. She has also been projected as a haughty or arrogant character who rejects

Karna's participation in her *swayamvar* merely because of his lowly status, and he was humiliated in public by her. Although she is in love with him and pines for him, she ends up rejecting him. One of the Pandavas, Arjuna, won her hand in marriage, but she had to marry all the five brothers because of her mother-in-law and became the queen of Indraprastha. She had to go through numerous problems and was labelled and ridiculed by many because of her polyandry. Another character - Vrushali, the first wife of Karna, is a woman of integrity and strength. She remains the pillar of strength for Karna, and he seeks her advice while in a dilemma because of her

wisdom and piousness. Through her representation, Kané shows the complex side of a dominant yet passive woman. In her novel, Kané also mentions Bhanumati, the wife of Duryodhana. She is the daughter of Bhagadatta, the King of Pragjyotishya and not much is known about her. It is believed that she was aware of her husband's misdeeds against the Pandavas and Draupadi.

In a research paper published in the Research Journal of English, the author (Rai) presents the view that "Uruvi is the projection of a modern woman who isn't scared of social stigma, Kunti is presented as the scapegoat of the social traditions and culture. In the novel, Uruvi has voiced Kunti's thought who is given away by her father and forced to renounce her individuality. She is compelled by the circumstances to accept the title of Kuntibhoja, only to lose her husband at the hand of Madri." She further adds that Kané has invested "two-fold purposes" to the archaic writings - while on one hand, she explores the immense power and strength of her female characters, on the other hand, she is delving into the knotted life of Karna.

Sita's Sister

Kavita Kané has drawn inspiration for this novel from *Ramayana*. Her novel is part fiction and part reality. It has been written from Sita's sister, Urmila's point of view. Urmila was the daughter of the sagacious man, King Janaka of Mithila and Queen Sunaina and the younger sister of Sita. She was the wife of Lakshmana, the younger brother of Lord Rama. She is shown to be as dedicated to Sita as Lakshamana is to his brother Ram. Although Urmila is portrayed in a small role in Valmiki's *Ramayana* and other local versions, Kavita Kané has chosen her as the protagonist of her novel. She has removed her from the periphery of the story and has given this character the centre stage. She demands that the story be heard from her point of view. Urmila is a significant character in the story and one of the strongest characters in the novel. In another research, the researchers (Sharma, Bhatnagar) write, "Kané has portrayed Urmila's character showcasing her feminine power traits of modern women. She is not only independent and loyal but also confident and graceful. She is bold, outspoken then she is a dutiful, caring, learned scholar, a good Indian daughter in law, and a great ruler. She is compassionate and kind to others." They also point out that Urmila is independent, which is one of the strengths of a modern woman. She takes daring and bold stands, takes responsibility for her actions and is not afraid to take risks.

Menaka's Choice

Kavita Kané's third novel, Menaka's Choice, gives a detailed and nuanced perspective on the life and limitations of the glorious world of *Apsaras* in heaven. It also highlights their motivations, desires, needs and their wishes. Kané has presented the story of Menaka, the overlooked and less described mythical character, as an *apsara* in Indralok. Menaka is the most beautiful and intelligent apsara and is born from the mind of Brahma. In a book review by the author, Cris, he evaluates the book by saying that Menaka's Choice is a paradox as Menaka questions her role, not just that of an apsara but also that of a lover, a wife, a mother and above all, a woman. She is in constant search of the answers to her questions.

Lanka's Princess

In *Lanka's Princess*, Kavita Kané offers a look at the epic *Ramayana* from Surpanakha's point of view. In ancient texts, she is often portrayed as a demonic figure who manipulated and instigated the war between Rama and her brother, Ravana. However, in this book, we are able to see her untold story. We read about the birth of Surpanakha as Princess Meenakshi, how her mother rejected her for being ugly, her life as a child at her father's ashram and how she had to constantly live under the shadows of her brothers. According to Dirghangi and Mohanty, Surpanakha's character, in the *Ramayana,* has always been shown in sharp contrast to that of Sita's. While Surpanakha expressed her sexuality transgressing the societal markers of conceived femininity, Sita was always shown as the epitome of the "ideal wife". They also state that "Surpanakha has more similarities with an accomplished and liberated 21st century woman than any of her contemporaries." Kavita Kané concludes that the portrayal of the young character of Surpanakha was highly influenced by her complex relationship with her brothers and mother, and how openly her mother showed partiality towards her brothers.

The Fisher Queen's Dynasty

The novel '*The Fisher Queen's Dynasty'* by Kavita Kané is yet another story that retells the life of a female character. In this novel, the protagonist is Satyavati, a fisher girl who goes on to become a Queen. With the mythological reference and simple narration, characters from Kavita Kané's reconstructions of epics portray the role of women as powerful and political figures.

Satyavati had been raised as a bold lineage of the Kuru dynasty. She was an opportunist and embarked on the life of a queen. She ignored the speculation among the society and endured all the rebuffing. With her power, she made the people of the palace and kingdom dance to her tunes. She feared that her sons would one day not become the Kings of Hastinapur and thus, played politics strongly to allow her legacy to continue by keeping the throne occupied by her children and grandchildren.

Satyavati goes through continuous struggle and turmoil in order to prove herself as the rightful Queen of Hastinapur. She uses her powers and skills to look after her kingdom. She also proves her political prowess in the form of the decisions that she made for the welfare of her kingdom, Hastinapur. Satyavati goes through difficult situations and faces humiliation in her life – she is loved for her confidence but hated for her ruthlessness. However, with each hurdle, she becomes a stronger and tougher character. Despite the obstacles, she keeps her concentration focused on her goal. What separates her from most of the other female characters is that the author uses her example to deconstruct the accepted notion of motherhood and feminine nurture. She made her daughters-in-law to produce heir through 'Niyoga' a practice to produce child outside the wedlock. In Asha and Nadhini's research work, they describe Satyavati as a determined woman who utilized lust as a weapon to achieve what she always felt deprived of. Kavita Kané does a great job at exploring Satyavati's cold and emotionless decisions, ruthlessness and desperation through the retelling of the myth.

Ahalya's Awakening

Kavita Kané has picked up another character from the Indian epic, the *Ramayana*. This character is Ahalya. We know little of her, as she has not been mentioned extensively in the epic but what we do know is that she was cursed to turn to stone by her husband, Rishi Gautam, for her infidelity and was liberated by Ram. However, in the novel *Ahalya's Awakening,* Kané writes about Ahalya's life right from infancy to the stage where she grows up to become a confident, beautiful and intelligent woman. Kané says that despite being an admirable character, Ahalya is also counted among the most doubted characters in mythology. She is rarely given importance as a complex and deep character, despite being one. Researchers such as Asha and Nadhini have stated that Kavita Kané has given a brave voice to the women who were muted in ancient texts and

has added a new distinct dimension to the psyche of women who lived through a society that scrutinized their every action in the name of old patriarchal domination.

In *Retrieval of Female Subjectivity in Indian English Writing: Kavita Kané's Feministic Concern,* the authors have said that Kané's message through the above-mentioned novels is "uproarious and clear." Through her writings, she demolishes the age-old belief that a woman is made for the satisfaction of man and is rather quite competent and intelligent to understand and project her inborn feelings. She gives these women space in her literature to tell their true story, something that has always been denied at social, political, monetary and literary levels.

Research Methodology

The proposed research will be done by a close reading of the existing literature. In addition to this, a comparative study would be done with the epic tales- *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*- to relate the characters with their depictions over the ages and find differences between them and the works of Kavita Kané. To achieve the objective of the research, both primary and secondary sources will be used. Critical, evaluative, analytical, interpretive, descriptive and if needed, a comparative approach will be adapted and applied to study the available literature. The data will be collected from various sources such as journals, conferences/seminar proceedings, reviews, interviews, articles, blogs, secondary sources and primary sources. In addition to these, library research methodology and analytical research methodology will also be applied to the proposed study.

All the female characters will be studied from a transformative point of view and the consequences of these transformations in evolving them.

Tentative Chapterization

Chapter 1- Women in Vedic Culture: An Interrogation of Female Psyche: This chapter will highlight the status of women in Vedic culture as well as women in the subsequent era in brief.

Chapter 2- Reading the SELF: Sita and Draupadi: This chapter will delineate the true nature of Sita and Draupadi. Their nature and proximity with Nature will be discussed in context of their birth.

Chapter 3- Reading Female Psyche under Male Dominance and Social Constraints: This chapter will focus on reading female psyche under the restrictions imposed on women in the male dominated society. The chapter will also highlight the plight of Sita, Urmila, Draupadi, Surpnakha, Uruvi and Ahalya.

Chapter 4- Progeny, Women and Niyoga: This chapter will analyze the 'Niyoga' episode from the novels under study. The effects of women's participation in the then prevalent custom of producing an heir for the kingdom on their psyche will be examined. The ancient Indian law book, Manu Smriti, will also be consulted to make the research authentic. In this context, female psyche of Ambika, Ambalika, Madri and Kunti will be highlighted.

Chapter 5- Oscillating between Choices: Menaka and Satyavati: This chapter will project the mental state of Menaka and Satyavati in achieving their ultimate goal through their weapon of lust and treachery and oscillating between their choices.

Chapter 6- Inner Quest for Knowledge: A Struggle: This chapter will bring out elements from Ahlya's and Urmila's struggle for attaining knowledge within the paradigm of patriarchal society.

Chapter 7- Conclusion: The final chapter will conclude the thesis by manifesting already discussed events with their impact on the mind of female characters.

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